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First record of the Combtooth Blenny, *Microlipophrys adriaticus* (Steindachner & Kolombatovic, 1883) (Pisces, Blenniidae), for the Italian Ionian Sea

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Abstract: *Microlipophrys adriaticus* (Steindachner & Kolombatovic, 1883) is an endemic blenny of the Mediterranean Sea. It is also known from the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. However, unlike other species of combtooth blennies, *M. adriaticus* is a fish with a limited distribution in Adriatic Sea, especially in the north, where it can be common. We report here the first record of this species from the waters of the Ionian Sea.

Key words: blennies, Ionian Sea, Adriatic Sea, Italian waters, *Microlipophrys*

In the recent years a considerable spread of Atlantic species in the Mediterranean Sea has characterized the Italian waters. The most recent examples of this increase in species' range concern blennies species such as *Parablennius pilicornis* (Cuvier, 1829) (Tiralongo 2012a) and *Scartella cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Tiralongo 2012b). Furthermore, native species are expanding their range of distribution (Falzon 2009). *Microlipophrys adriaticus* (Steindachner & Kolombatovic, 1883), unlike others endemic combtooth blennies of the Mediterranean Sea, has a limited distribution confined to the Adriatic Sea (Relini and Lanteri 2010), especially in the north, where it can be common and in the Aegean Sea. It is also present in the Sea of Marmara and in the Black Sea. In July 2011, we recorded the presence of this species in the Ionian Sea (Figure1). The species was seen within the "Mar Piccolo" of Taranto (40.48090 N, 017.26740 E), an urbanized inland sea heavily impacted by human activities (Figure 2).

M. adriaticus is one of the four species of the genus *Microlipophrys* in Italian waters (Almada et al. 2005). It is an inhabitant of very shallow waters, not more than 2 m of depth with preference for the intertidal zone (Duci et al. 2009). This blenny, as similar species, is an omnivore that feeds on small invertebrates, especially crustaceans, detritus and algae (Whitehead et al. 1986). The parental male of this genus shows a typical "head mask" during the breeding season when the cheeks become yellow with the rest of the head dark. The only two species that could be confused with *M. adriaticus* are the two congeners *M. canevae* (Vinciguerra, 1880) and *M. dalmatinus* (Steindachner & Kolombatovic, 1883). However, *M. adriaticus* shows particular features that allow an easy

Figure 1. Distribution of *Microlipophrys adriaticus* in Italian waters. The red zone indicates the area of normal distribution of the species. The black spot is the new record for the Ionian Sea.

Figure 2. A specimen of *Microlipophrys adriaticus* in Ionian Sea, Taranto. It was observed at a depth of a few centimeters on hard substrate with a moderate algal cover. (Photo R. Baldacconi).

and rapid identification. This blenny is a little fish with an elongated body, usually does not exceed the 5 cm of total length. The color pattern shows six black vertical bars on the back and in the upper sides. These dark bars are more or less connected together in a dark band running along the sides of the body up to the caudal peduncle. The background color is brownish. Some reddish points may be visible in the dark area of the higher front zone of the body. The lower body is uniformly white or yellowish. The species is probably naturally expanding its normal distribution range considering the line of continuity between the Adriatic Sea and the Ionian Sea, as has already probably happened for other fish species (Tiralongo et al. 2013). Although this species is not observed for the south Adriatic, its absence could simply be due to the small size of this fish, not always easy to notice, or to misidentification with other blennies of genus *Microlipophrys*.

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